

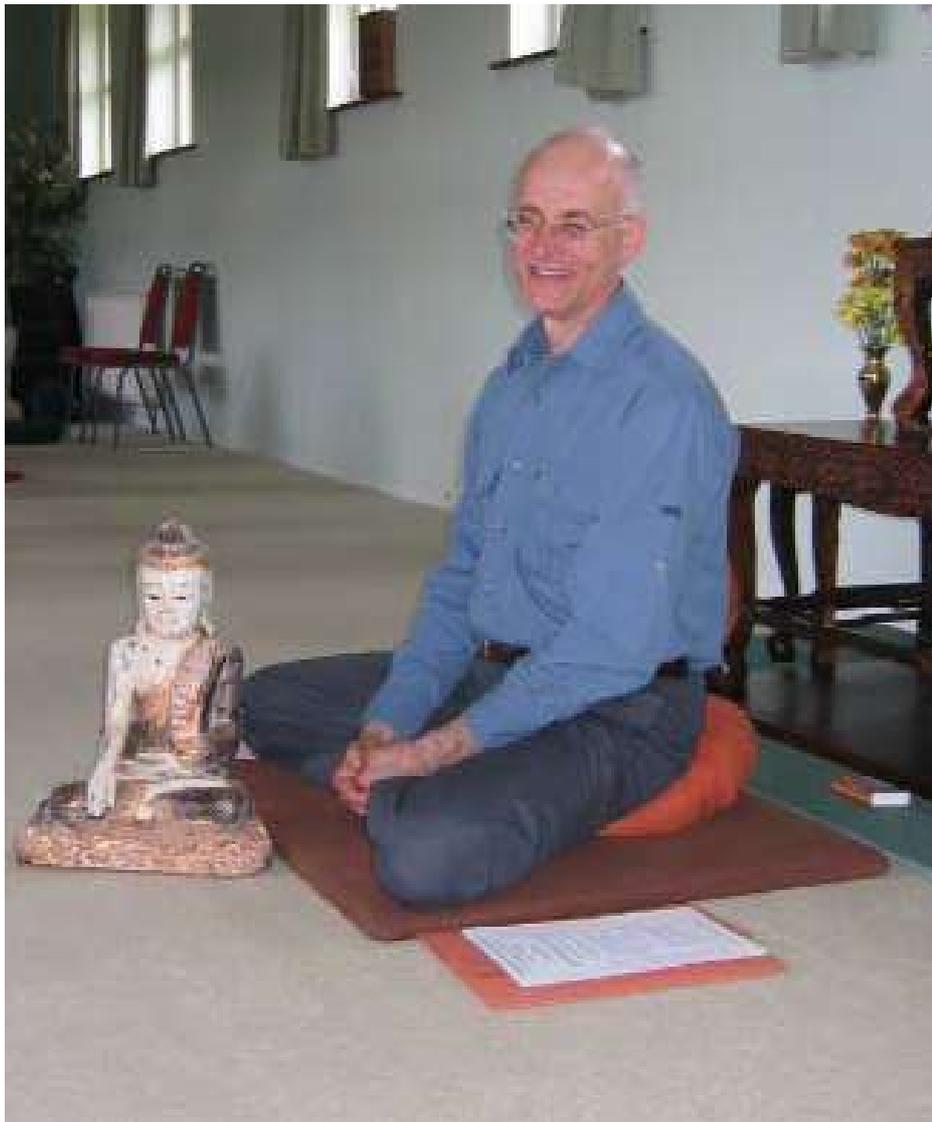


Community

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The Upāsaka & Upāsikā Newsletter

Issue No. 21



Nick Carroll with the Buddha Rupa donated to him by the AUA on the occasion of our 10th anniversary

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EDITORIAL

Teaching Buddhism

How do we learn ‘Buddhism’? A question that naturally leads to wondering — how is Buddhism taught? Immediately after his enlightenment, the Buddha considered that it would prove too difficult and wearisome to teach what he had realised — the great hesitation—as it has been called. It was only after the intercession of Brahmā Sahampati that the Buddha relented and shouldered the burden of teaching. So the intention to teach is not an inevitable result of enlightenment, but an example of compassionate action. It is an act of generosity.

The non-inevitability of teaching is emphasised by the class of enlightened beings who do not teach—the *pacceka-buddhas*— who are regarded as independently enlightened and who delight in solitude, so they do not become ‘teachers of Gods and humans’

I think that many Western practitioners assume that teaching the Dhamma is what Buddhist monks and nuns do. And yet this is not necessarily the case. We are fortunate that the Forest Sangha has fostered a series of great teachers, and yet not all monks and nuns teach — even after many years in the cloth.

Before teaching others, there may be the aspiration to practice until a certain level of purity and spiritual maturity is achieved. Or there may be a lack of inclination to teach and a practice of offering service in other ways—perhaps by providing support and training to more junior monks and nuns. Underlying this is the fact that teaching is given as an act of generosity. It is free of charge. An act of generosity is not an obligation, duty or business transaction, but something freely given.

Those Forest Sangha monks and nuns who do teach, often adopt Ajahn Chah’s approach of not preparing at all (or very much) and by speaking directly about what is a current preoccupation or reflection. This generates a quality of immediacy and ‘life’ in discourses and is an example of the ‘Dhamma in practice’. The speaker is alive to the current situation, both internally and externally and demonstrates a trust in the way events will naturally unfold.

This policy of ‘unpreparedness’, which might also be seen as a deliberate abiding in uncertainty, is hard to follow. It requires confidence, a willingness to fail (in worldly terms) and it painfully illuminates self-consciousness and the desire to deliver a perfect (or even a useful) discourse.

The experience of hearing a Dhamma discourse given in this way is powerful in that it can touch us at an intuitive level, as well as providing information about aspects of the teachings.

Given the nature of these discourses, there is no ‘curriculum’ that they follow, so they may repeat familiar ground, or seem to provide only a few pieces of a much larger jigsaw. Over a period of time, though, and with persistence, many practitioners get enough clues to gradually construct a map or model of what the Buddhist path is about. The clues may lead to books and texts; may lead to more focused practice, or may be solved by questioning a fellow lay or monastic practitioner.

Consistently abiding in unpreparedness and uncertainty might be a route to dismissal from many school or university teaching roles. (Although I know that many experienced teachers and lecturers ‘wing it’ and deliver an unprepared lesson when circumstances dictate).

The more usual method of teaching in schools and colleges is to use a syllabus and deliver this as a course of sessions in a carefully structured manner to a selected audience.

The advantage of this method is that for a motivated student, a consistent and comprehensive mental model may be constructed. Concepts and terms can be learnt and their meaning gleaned by applying them to the discipline in question.

However, Buddhism is not only the digestion of a set of doctrines (*pariyatti*) and the learning of a spiritual vocabulary; it is more comprehensive than that. It supports a complete development of character. Not only are the qualities, motivation and integrity of the ‘teacher’ a great part of what is being taught, but the ‘vocabulary’ is to be reflected upon and applied if it is to prove useful and help free us from *dukkha*.

Chris Ward



The Problem With Anatta



Anatta is widely regarded as the unique teaching of Buddhism. There is certainly something refreshing about *Anatta* - coming to terms with the fact that ultimately we cannot claim possession of anything for ever and that no one thing in itself including God, exists as a changeless essence .

Some Buddhist publications and meditators can take this view to an extreme - there are often references to "no I", "no self". Buddhists turn it into a cherished belief that others may not be privileged to. But to what extent did the Buddha teach *anatta* and how may it be useful? As someone who has not awakened to this truth, I think it is a useful exercise to contemplate how seriously we should take "*anatta*".

Professor Richard Gombrich has argued that this teaching was presented to debunk the Upanishad view of an immortal soul. Many suttas such as ones referring to putting out the fires can be seen in the context of prevailing views and practices such as maintaining a sacred fire in a Brahmin's home (the ancient Greeks also had a sacred fire in the home, hearth fires were very important in the absence of matches). It is certainly probable that the Buddha taught *anatta*, especially to those of his disciples who believed in an immortal soul and demonstrated its fallacy in the context of change and absence of control over our bodies and minds.

The Buddha also emphasised the self. In the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha praises Queen Mallika for declaring her love for herself more than any other. In the Dhammapada there are several references to self. The Buddha says that neither mother nor father nor anyone can do more good for one, than one's self. He also emphasises self control as a means for happiness and declares the path to bring the self to an absolute fulfilment.

Clearly *anatta* needs to be put into context.

The Buddha taught the Middle way. There are many ways of defining this - the obvious one is a path between extreme asceticism or sensual indulgence. It is also a way between eternalism and nihilism. Eternalists believe in the existence of something which is substantial and may last for "ever and ever". Nihilists believe in nothing - all is emptiness. The Buddha warned his disciples against both extremes though I often find myself becoming an eternalist when I'm especially attached or con-

vinced of something and a nihilist when I'm cynical or depressed. The Middle way is subtle and easy to overlook.

To believe in *anatta* is sometimes a manifestation of the eternalist position. It is also more frequently a trap for nihilists who may be dismissive of other beings with a subtle aspect of hatred creeping in. The sort of hatred that states "I/we are *just* ... ". A meditator who forces herself to believe in *anatta* may end up on either extreme with no possibility of development as she is in constant denial of her body or mind and forcing herself into a view and sometimes trying to convince others about "no I"!

When we cultivate metta towards all beings it seems important to perceive the selves in others. The Buddha frequently taught that beings generally love life and fear pain. Metta and compassion are cultivated using these contexts.

We can resolve the paradox of *anatta* in Buddhism by seeing that there is a self, but not an unchanging one. Though a point in the river remains, it is also flowing. Ajahn Brahmavamso has summarised this by saying that dependent origination is your self. *Anatta* as a teaching is useful as it stops us from getting stuck anywhere and this is probably a key reason why the Buddha presented it. He did not teach *anatta* so that we would deny our reality and lean towards nihilism. Sometimes the nihilistic position is an overemphasis of wisdom not balanced by concentration which tends to include subtle aversion.

Some meditation teachers say that it is important to develop a very strong self before you can experience no-self. Concentration practice is the unification/integration of mind, and in strengthening concentration you have to abandon lesser, more distracted selves. Traditionally, only at Stream Entry does *anatta* become meaningful but even then, pride and attachment remain, though in a different form.

Anatta is useful to help letting go, but not as useful when taken as a view or belief . It is possible to suggest as Ajahn Chah has, that you find your real home and self, when you have seen what it is not.

Rajith Dissanayake



The Women's Weekend

The first weekend for women at Amaravati Retreat Centre was organised under the AUA in July by Chris Blain and Jenni Jepson. Here are a few of the individual reflections and photos from that event.



“One of the last things to happen on the women’s weekend was for everyone to be offered a posy of lavender, incense and a candle held together by paper with a word on it. My word was ‘abundance’ which summed up the weekend for me.

It was a significant weekend in many ways. It was a full, blue moon and Dhammacakka day when Buddhists celebrate the Buddha’s first sermon. It was also 100 days since my dear friend Kalyani (Catherine Hewitt) died, so I absented myself from the retreat on Saturday morning to help prepare the Dana and attend the very moving and beautiful interment of ashes ceremony in the Buddha grove.



The retreat itself was also beautiful and moving because of the spirit of friendship and openness which prevailed throughout. There was a very loving and supportive atmosphere, a space created by Chris and Jenni as well as by each and every woman who participated (not forgetting the special magic of the Retreat Centre itself). This was a space for women to express their emotions, as well as reflect. During the retreat there were the usual *pujas* and periods of silent meditation, but also times for group sharing, creative activities and communication exercises, all conducted in a spirit of mindfulness and loving acceptance. One of the things that emerged for me was the importance of listening, to oneself and others.

So I processed a lot over that weekend and I felt very nourished (abundantly so!). I am sure the weekend was powerful for others too. I was aware that some women came to the retreat with very deep hurts and that they found the weekend very helpful. However I wonder how they fared coming out from Amaravati

into the harshness of the world outside.

I have been reflecting on this since, and about spiritual friendship generally. For me it is about nourishment; it’s about caring for each other and accepting each other just as we are. We also need to learn to care for and accept ourselves - most of us need good friends to help us do this. A true spiritual friend also keeps us from drifting off the track and supports us in our practice by encouraging us to live in the moment.

The Upasika movement is nourishing this sense of community, but we are a scattered bunch. Some of us live a long way from the monasteries and cannot get there frequently. Some of us belong to local groups; others may feel quite isolated from spiritual companionship. So how can we nourish this sense of caring and supportiveness; how can we continue to develop a strong lay community and how can we help support those who may be feeling isolated? This certainly is not just an issue for women.

Shirley

This weekend was journey into the unknown and it certainly was full of surprises for everyone, including us coordinators! We surprised ourselves and we surprised each other. We all seem to have come away with a “wow, I didn’t expect that!” - whether it’s in relation to the content of the weekend or our own inner process. The profound sense of love, connection and community that was generated among us knocked me for six! It was awesome to see what can emerge when women come together, bringing with them pain and joy and a willingness to be present with both. So much courage and risk-taking - a willingness to go beyond our usual boundaries, to share with others, and (perhaps most challenging of all for some of us), to let others touch our hearts. In exploring our needs and telling our stories, I felt we began to open our eyes to what might be possible for ourselves, what might be possible in our relationships and in community with each other.

I left with a deep respect for each woman who had been part of this, and for myself and my willingness to go to the edge - and jump! After so many years of painful life challenges, I felt I reclaimed my power. I picked up the sword of courage and found I could stand in that place of knowing, trusting in the good heart of those around me, and held by the precious tradition and spiritual community of Amaravati. The song has been sung and it’s a song of great strength, love and tenderness. May all women come

and add their voice.

Chris



I came on this retreat because I had made a good connection with a woman who was going to it, and I wanted more! I thought it would be a space where I could deepen my connection with others and this is exactly what happened - both in the small 'home' groups and the larger group. This mixture of size of groups worked well for me. Also, because we were not in Noble Silence the whole time, I was able to connect with all the women there. For example, during the hand and foot massage. Not all the women chose to come and some that did were a little anxious, but we were all up for it! The form Jenni showed us was so simple and effective - it got me to the deepest place of relaxation of the whole weekend - I was able to really let go and didn't want to get up. All the women involved were surprised at the depth it's possible to go in such a short time - there was a sense of connection and intimacy between us without any self-consciousness.

This was the most significant aspect of the whole weekend for me - that a space was created where I could feel safe and fully present without self-consciousness. Even though some women didn't want to go into any depth, the space was one where we could hold each other and allow the unpredictable to emerge - so lots came to the surface we hadn't previously been aware of. I was surprised how much this process lifted from me. I could be kind to myself and allow myself to take whatever time it took - there was a real gentleness with myself and others.

The writing exercise was especially amazing and came at just the right time. It followed a guided meditation and reflection when we had time to absorb what came up - but instead of discussing it afterwards, we wrote freely in silence. I wrote some things I didn't know I could write! It gave me such clarity and the real answers about why I was there. It just came tumbling out - some of it was like poetry. I really enjoyed it, it was amazing.

The Saturday evening sharing left the space open for any-

thing to emerge and was deeply moving. I can still see the shrine with our offerings on it, each one a trigger of the memory of the story told. The sharing of stories, the variety of experience and the depth of sharing in that moment was poignant. Each woman's contribution was like a pebble in a pond, extending out and touching us all very deeply. Because it all emerged in story telling, it was as if we had each given our own dhamma talk.

The space encouraged access to more creative aspects of ourselves. I think that a 'normal' retreat programme wouldn't have created this depth of connection and allow the process to evolve as it did. The different exercises and ways of working provided more ways of being creatively mindful - you couldn't distract or absent yourself - you had to be present. However, the balance with the traditional form was just right - the ritual, the chanting and formal meditation was also important as it held the Buddhist structure.

Jande



There was a very special quality that emanated from the weekend which I felt was like being with a bunch of mixed flowers and witnessing the gentle and beautifully silent slowness when they open their petals and radiate. Sounds corny, but I really felt that beauty coming out of people, in the slow and quiet way that nature has.

Perhaps the most moving part for me was the closing ceremony. How was it that the 'words' (*that were picked out at random—ed*) were so synchronous, especially mine? I felt so moved I could hardly speak clearly at all - as my word was 'communication'! I know I need to be in contact with people more, communicating ideas, and I find it difficult to speak easily in large groups, but also I felt very moved and wanted to offer something.

A.

Continued

The Women's Weekend—continued

“Was I challenged or merely irritated? I've taken part in lots of women's events with the FWBO (Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) who also run lots of men's events too. It's always puzzled me: why do men get to go on camping expeditions and light bonfires, while women make things with crepe paper and glitter? I don't get it. I'd much rather go camping and tramping. On the other hand, I was looking forward to a weekend of silent meditation, not gazing into people's eyes and talking a lot. Maybe that was the challenge, to feel thoroughly irritated and still participate? I do love being with just women though.” C.

For the first time in 8 years of coming here, I could bring all of me. J.

“I felt relaxed and could say things I couldn't say in a mixed group. Men tend to take over and dominate, and some think that we don't have anything serious to say - so I often feel intimidated and can't speak out. I think it's also part of my upbringing too - that my priority should be home and family. So I have less confidence in the groups when there are men present. The weekend was more friendly than a mixed retreat so I felt more relaxed and confident. I spoke to Ajahn Sumedho about the weekend and he was all for women-only retreats.” S.



The guided meditations were wonderful - I still think of them in my own daily meditation, especially about focusing on the body. This was really powerful for me because I tend to prefer not being in my body. The retreat had an effect of bringing me to the physical plane - and since then 'my soul has landed'. The retreat has become one of the most significant and important experiences of my life so far and there were such wonderful women around me to share this with. I also felt that the retreat had a wonderful combination of creativity,

sharing, silence, meditation, humour and seriousness - and all of it combined together so beautifully. H.



I don't know what Chris did to us in the first relaxation, but it was the most significant part of the weekend for me. I had left a very stressful family situation, but in that 15 minutes of lying down right at the very beginning of the retreat, I felt I let go of everything. N.

I was impressed at how we stayed true to the form and honoured the Buddhist tradition. Yet there was more spontaneity to it than other retreats I have done. We were provided with more tools for the kit-bag!

Women who would like to receive information about future activities and events can contact Jenni Jepson on 0777 5521428 or Shirley McDonald on 01622 203751

Winter Days of Practice—2005

Don't languish at home in the dark days of winter! Shrug off your seasonally affected syndrome and come to Amaravati for meditation and networking with fellow practitioners. Both new and more experienced practitioners are welcome.

Dates and Leaders are as follows

Jan. 15th (Jenni Jepson)
Feb 12th (Martin Evans)
Mar 12th (Chris Ward)

9.45am for 10am-5pm. There is no need to book (please bring food to share)

Organised by the Amaravati Upasaka/Upasika Association (AUA)

Suzanne Reindorp 1945 – 2004.

Many who knew Suzie will know of her illness and recent death.

Suzie had been a member of the Bodhinyana group and had attended AUA events at Amaravati. She had come to Buddhism and the Forest Sangha Tradition after a long journey of searching and enquiry. She enjoyed the spirit and open minded quality of practice that she found at Amaravati and often spoke of how much she benefited from the teachings of Luang Por Sumedho.

She herself helped many in her own work as a relationship counsellor and therapist, and she subsequently shared her skills as a trainer and supervisor for Relate.

The treatment that followed the diagnosis of cancer was unsuccessful and in August she was told to expect only a few more months of life. She moved with her partner Ellis to a rural part of north Devon, not too far from the sea which she was very fond of, where her family were able to come and stay and visit her.

She found both sorrow and consolation in her condition and in her own words she “flowed with events”. She felt immensely grateful that she had the time to say goodbye to her family and friends and that she had the opportunity to face her death consciously. She spoke of being blessed by all the wonderful people whom she is got to know so much more deeply in her dying process and was especially grateful for the support and love she received from her Dhamma friends at Amaravati with whom she felt such a strong connection.

Her service was held in Bath where her mother had been cremated only a few months previously. The service included a selection of readings from the Old and New Testaments as well as a chanting of the ‘Metta Sutta’, the order of service reflecting her own spiritual journey.

In one of her last letters to a Dhamma friend she wrote:

“I am feeling very close to you all at Amaravati and have been helped to move towards a peaceful, contented and accepting space about what is happening now. My heart is full of love-received and given, and fears are mostly small. I also feel great sorrow and loss leaving this life and all whom I love at this early age. I have been greatly blessed in my life and I dwell mostly in gratitude for all I have received. I know we are all one & all is well”

Nick Carroll

Community Newsletter by Email

We can send Community as an Acrobat file attached to an email. You can also simply read and download the newsletter from our web site: www.buddhacommunity.org.

Dhamma Talks On Line

First get ‘realplayer’ for free, (try it through www.bbc.co.uk/radio, they will alert you on how to get ‘realplayer’ if you don't have it). Then visit

<http://www.dhammatalks.org.uk/>

Talks may take 30 minutes or more to download on a non-broadband connection. There are many weeks worth of listening available from Forest Sangha teachers.



Kindness & Understanding in Relationship



When a loved one dies, we grieve. When someone says they love us we are happy. Walking along a pavement we are often indifferent to others, but all it takes is to catch someone's eye or bump into someone, and 'being in relationship' kicks in.

Buddhism is primarily concerned with investigating and gaining insight into human suffering in order to find release from it. In analysing the human being, the Buddha identified the primary components into five 'heaps' or 'aggregates' called the *khanda's*. These were the physical body, feelings (sensations), perceptions (ideas), *sankhara's* (mental formations or wishes and desires) and sense consciousness. Whilst not a scientific analysis as we would generally understand it today, this classification continues to be very helpful when reflecting on our over-identification with our bodies, feelings and thoughts and the sense of self-identity that naturally arises as a result. This sense of self identity that has been so essential for biological survival throughout evolution also binds us to the very *samsara*, the endless cycle of life and death, that we struggle so hard to survive. It is in this perception of being an independent or separate self identity in relationships to others that most of us experience so much suffering today.

From the first moment of life we are born into relationship. We have no choice. Apart from the odd individual who may have started life in a test tube, most of us have a mother, and certainly all have a carer, for as infants we cannot survive otherwise. Psychological studies show that our whole development is affected by our very earliest experiences. The way we are held, looked at, touched, stroked, talked to and generally related to, all leave an impression. Our formative years form the basis of our reactive processes which continue throughout life. Experience after experience combines and interacts with our inherited characteristics and together with environmental factors forms a complex matrix of interacting conditioning factors that contribute to each one of us developing as a recognisable and unique individual.

The Buddha was the first to clearly identify that the sense of self and the thirst, or *tanha*, that gives rise to it, is the root cause of human suffering and delusion. The question can then be asked, how can a self abandon it's 'self'? The short and immediate answer is, through realising "*the Mind which is naturally pure and radiant*". For most of us the longer answer is found in the Eightfold Path which identifies the internal and external aspects of life that we experience and need to

address in our path to freedom. In doing so, it addresses the key aspects of relationship that we have with others as well as the inner relationship that we have with ourselves.

One difficulty that we all have with formulas or lists is that they are dry and factual and can easily lose their significance. The Eightfold Noble Path can appear like another list. We need to decode all teachings, get into what they are trying to convey and see if they are relevant to one's own experience. When I first came across Nyanatiloka's Buddhist Dictionary I felt rather down hearted for I wasn't able to relate very many of the translated terms to my personal experiences. I picked the book up occasionally and then put it away for long periods of time as I got on with my 'Buddhism' and my practice. But something brought me back to that little dictionary again and again, like a dog with a plastic bone, as I tried to make sense of the definitions it contained. And gradually it did begin to make sense, which was very pleasing. The teachings so neatly summarised, acted as a reference point as well as a reminder. It was like gradually unlocking a puzzle, but it was a puzzle in my own mind, for what was becoming apparent was already obvious, only that I hadn't been seeing it.

If we look at the Eightfold Path we see that Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood address our relationships with others, whereas Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation address our inner life.

Under Right Speech we find all the subtle ways that we can misuse verbal communication, such as telling untruths, using speech to create division between others, or hurtful speech whereby we cause pain to others. We have only to pause and think about how we ourselves have, say in the last few days, used our speech with someone close to us, perhaps our partner, a member of family, or a colleague at work, or perhaps even another driver who happened to cut us up on the road, to see how even thinking about such an incident can affect our state of mind and our sense of ease. Thinking about that even now, how does it make us feel? Not very good, unless of course we still think they really deserved it, but then is that *really* a good feeling?

Under Right Action we find the ways that we can harm others through deeds, such as perhaps holding onto a child just that little bit too hard because it has angered us, or pushing one's way through a crowd too forcefully or even hitting someone, perhaps even self harming oneself. Right Action also addresses not taking what is not given, being dishonest in a shop or with someone

else's property such as not returning a loan or book, or perhaps in making a dishonest insurance claim. Under Right Action we also find avoidance of sexual misconduct. In today's context I would understand sexual misconduct to mean initiating or having an intimate relationship with someone when one of the participants is already in a committed relationship. It would also include having sexual relations with minors or vulnerable individuals. As one's practice deepens and one's sensibilities become increasingly refined it could also include the use of one's partner as a sexual object or perhaps indulging unnecessarily in sexual fantasies and self arousal.

Right Livelihood suggests we avoid jobs which are based on wrong speech or action, such as trading in arms, people or animals, or dealing in drugs and poison. But Right Livelihood also touches on the suffering faced by many committed lay Buddhists when we struggle with trying to reconcile the values of our workplace, employer or the market place with our own value system. Who amongst us hasn't struggled with that one?

Further in the Eightfold Path we see that Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation address our inner life. This touches on the whole domain of self cultivation or *bhavana*. This is where we really get to know our weaknesses, our laziness, attachments, fears and angers; where we are confronted with all the reactive process that bind us to our suffering. This is also where we process our reflections, our understanding of Dhamma teachings as we relate and apply them to our daily life and interactions. This is where with a deepening of our meditation practice we can also experience increasingly refined states of mind that give us a pleasurable break from the demands and realities of daily life.

What I have called the outer relationships is usually classified under the term morality or *sila*. That in turn feeds into our inner world, usually referred to as meditation, or *samadhi*. It is a two-way feed back system which includes all aspects of one's life and practice. It is the practice of both *sila* and *samadhi* that gives rise to the development and fruition of Right View and Right Intention, normally referred to as Wisdom or *panna*, the culmination of the Path.

The more intimate and personal the relationship is, the more we will be confronted with challenges in our practice of the Eightfold Path. The interactions that arise in intimate relationships can become so overwhelming that we can and often do, simply lose sight of the 'bigger' picture as we get caught up in the needs and demands of that relationship and its consequences. It is for this reason monks and nuns relinquish intimate relationships.

For lay practitioners that is not always possible. But, irrespective of where we find ourselves, whether in monastic or lay life, we will always feel and be challenged where we need to grow most. Such is the

beauty of life. The greater the challenge, the greater the potential for change or transformation.

In my work as a relationship and couple therapist I see time and again that our ability to grow emotionally and spiritually in any close relationship is directly related not only to our capacity for awareness, but also in our capacity to be kind towards one another as well as understanding of one another. These two qualities, kindness and understanding, together with mindfulness, are the key factors of practice in any set of conditions. To be kind at heart and genuinely understanding requires openness, acceptance and forgiveness, a letting go of hurt or resentment. It requires skilfulness in thought, word and deed. It means a surrendering of self centeredness without loss of respect for oneself or the other, together with the ability to stay with the knowing of what is right and wrong. Rising to the challenge of being kind and understanding in those extreme moments that can and do arise in relationships requires great courage, endurance and patience.

In surrendering to this path of practice in relationship, any relationship, be it in community life or between two individuals, our sense of 'I', 'me' and 'mine', becomes increasingly unsustainable, *if we allow it to*. As our sense of self is increasingly seen as conditioned and impermanent as well as the source of our suffering, there arises a natural movement towards letting go of it. Together with the letting go there is also the arising of the resistance to letting go, so much so that it actually hurts, until the letting go actually happens, the moment of release. Sometimes, on the other hand, one just has to suffer the waiting until the other lets go. All this is at the heart of practice and of transformation. It is important to remember that in many critical moments when we are being tested to the limit, we can only do what we can do, for much of what is taking place is a natural process of growth where the 'I' has little say. No-Self can then increasingly express word and deed more spontaneously and naturally. With that expression is the freedom from suffering in action whilst fully experiencing the conditions of the way things are.

As our lay community of the AUA at Amaravati develops, so we will be increasingly challenged by the dynamics we find ourselves in. We can harp back to a golden age when we didn't have any problems with each other, but then we weren't experiencing the complexities that can develop in longer term relationships. At least most of us will hopefully not be experiencing the intensity of suffering that can arise in close personal relationships.

In practicing the principles of the Noble Eight fold Path we can't go wrong. What a lovely refuge to have, the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. If we live our lives attending to both the inner and outer aspects of the Path we will be on the way to realising a way of being in harmony with others at all times.

Nick Carroll

Larry Gunward (1935 - 2004)

Larry Gunward died peacefully in his sleep on Sunday 11th Oct after many years of gradual debilitation through Parkinsons disease. He had become very weak, was constantly losing his balance, his speech was becoming hard to understand and he was finding it difficult to sustain his thought processes. He had begun telling me he would be happy to die.

You would have thought he would have been happy to die in his sleep, but his wish was that he would die at Amaravati, perhaps during the chanting and at the end someone would just find him dead. I told him that it would be very inconvenient for them and he must have taken my advice. But he loved Amaravati and he just wanted to be there, it was that simple.

One might think that coming from Sri Lanka he would have been born a Buddhist, but he was from a Catholic family, and he only became interested in Buddhism through his contact with Amaravati. He was not interested in theoretical teachings. He liked the teaching to be from the heart and this is what he found, right on his doorstep.

He often attended our Bodhinyana Group meetings. but he was not a great speaker and would often remain silent for most of the discussion, only 'throwing a pebble in the water' to challenge any cosy consensus we had come to. He wouldn't let us become complacent.

He did most of his talking late at night, over a cup of tea after I'd taken him home. Then we would sum up the discussion for his wife Kirsten, cut out the theory and go to the heart of it. Many people will miss Larry, he had so many friends. People warmed to his quiet unassuming nature and his subtle sense of humour. He often came to AUA events and was at his happiest when chopping vegetables in the retreat kitchen, especially if he was not meant to be there.

He had a rebellious spark in him which I found refreshing, and a childlike capacity to enjoy simple things.

We will miss him.

Martin Evans

Amaravati Monastic Led Retreats 2005 Programme

The 2005 programme of retreats led by monks and nuns at Amaravati is now available. It can be found at the Website:

<http://www.amaravati.org/abm/english/announce/2005.html>

Retreats run on a donation basis: no booking fee is required. Due to demand there will be a limit of 3 retreats per person per year. N.B. 2005 retreats places will be allocated in early December 2004

Please follow the booking instructions contained at this site.

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For Guest Information: please write to the Guest monk / nun or visit the website at www.amaravati.org

Letters & News

An Appeal

Dear friends,

As you may know, Jen is still staying at Amaravati Monastery where she has been since January 2004. She became very ill again last winter, and although her health has begun to improve she is often still unable to sit herself up. She continues to need full time support from carers. Jen remains restricted to her bed most of the time. She could begin to move around a little bit and become more independent if she had a new wheelchair. Her old one has recently irreparably broken, and even if it was ok it no longer meets her current needs. She now needs a fully reclining wheelchair with a very supportive seating system. This is not available under the National Health Service despite her dependency on state benefits. These wheelchairs are very expensive. Jen has already started to save towards one, but we still need to raise about £8,000. Can you help? I'm writing to many of you who know and love Jen to ask if you would like to contribute to this fund. Some of you may also have ideas and energy to organise fund-raising events; some of you might consider this as a birthday gift, (her birthday is coming up and she says she wants for nothing else). Please know that any amount will make a lot of difference to Jen's life. If you would like any more details please contact me on this e-mail address, or UK phone number 0115 944 3034.

Please make cheques payable to Jen Mobility and send them to me at 25 Main Street, Mapperley Village, Derbyshire DE7 6BY, UK.

Yours in peace,

Billie Riley.

Lay-Practice Survey

I am currently undertaking research looking at contemporary approaches to teaching Dhamma to lay-practitioners. As part of this I have created a questionnaire which many attendees to Amaravati have already completed. I have also received responses from Abhayagiri in the US. If you wish to help with this survey you can complete a questionnaire online. This can be found at <http://www.buddhacommunity.org/aua1.htm>.

Many thanks for your help.

Chris Ward Email info@buddhacommunity.org

Observance Days for 2004 and 2005

MOON PHASE	 HALF	 NEW	 HALF	 FULL	 HALF	 NEW
OCTOBER	6th	13th	21st	28th		
NOVEMBER	5th	11th	19th	26th		
DECEMBER	4th	11th	19th	26th		
JANUARY 05	3rd	9th	17th	24th	-	-
FEBRUARY 05	1st	8th	16th	23rd	-	-
MARCH 05	3rd	9th	17th	24th	-	-
APRIL 05	1st	8th	16th	23rd	-	-
MAY 05	1st	7th	15th	22nd	30th	-
JUNE 05	-	6th	14th	21st	29th	-
JULY 05	-	5th	13th	20th	28th	-
AUGUST 05	-	4th	12th	19th	27th	-
SEPTEMBER 05	-	2nd	10th	17th	25th	-
OCTOBER 05	-	2nd	10th	17th	25th	31st
NOVEMBER 05	-	-	8th	15th	23rd	30th
DECEMBER 05	-	-	8th	15th	23rd	29th

The Buddha's Smile

When I was at school I was told off for smiling. I was given a detention. And when I was in detention I was given another. I was still smiling. I was told to 'wipe that smirk off my face'. I didn't know it was wrong to smile until then. Most people love to see a smile. There is nothing more warming to the heart than to be met with a smile.

I want you to look at the Buddha's face. Can you see his smile? It is very subtle. Why is he smiling? Is he experiencing a blissful meditative state? Or is it the smile of someone who is experiencing nothing?

I don't think either of these.

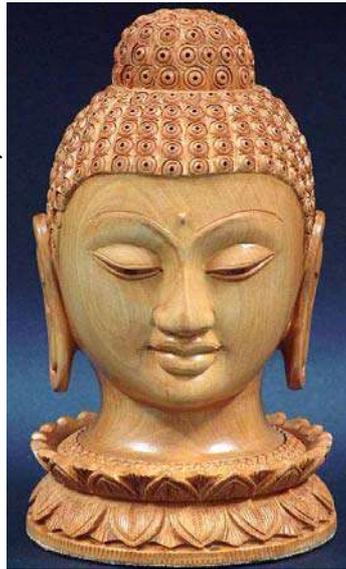
We can think that the Buddha's enlightenment is an escape from the world, an escape through meditation into a sublime state of existence. If we think that then we try to create this blissful state, through practicing some meditation technique, to develop concentration. But the Buddha rejected the path of concentration as leading to the ultimate goal in itself. He tried it and found it didn't lead to the end of suffering. He didn't deny the benefits of the concentrated mind, but he didn't find it lead him to the experience of the truth of the way things are.

Again, we can think that it is a complete escape into nothingness or some sort of non-existence. Well, the Buddha was very plain that his enlightenment wasn't of this world nor another. It wasn't an escape of any sort. It was a release, a freedom, but not a rejection.

So what is this smile? I think it is the experience of now. The end of seeking for anything other than the way it is right now. In our worldly thinking we could say 'contentment with nothing', because the currency of our experience is the past and the future. There is no experience of now in the grasping mind.

I think this word 'now' is a better word than 'mindful' or 'aware'. How is it right now? This question brings us into the immediacy of awareness or mindfulness, whereas to think of being aware indicates something we are going to be in the future. In the future we will never be aware, if we are not aware in the now.

It is the experience of laying down a burden. Doesn't that bring on a smile? Ah, yes, I know how that feels. When I walked from Lands End to John O'Groats I learnt all about how it felt to lay down my burden at the end of the day. The funny thing is, all we seek is contentment and that laying down of the burden is all it takes, that letting go into the way things are.



What else can you see in the Buddha's smile?

It is the smile of compassion. Isn't that a mystery, where this compassion comes from when there is no one trying to be compassionate. We think that we need to become compassionate. We don't have the trust that compassion is the expression of our true nature. When this sense of me and mine dissolves, this delusion of self, then there is nothing hindering the expression of compassion. And, although compassion is feeling the suffering of others, nevertheless, here it is in the form of a smile. But it is a slightly sad smile isn't it. A smile that embraces both happiness and suffering. Not an escape from the world, but a complete openness to the world.

Isn't it wonderful, that the Buddha's smile is already within us, just waiting to get out.

When we meditate we should cultivate this smile, we need to gladden the heart. I don't mean to become 'happy clappy' people, but Theravada Buddhism tends to appeal to people who like to take things seriously. There is no doubt that there is a darkness within that we should recognise, but seeing the truth is an experience of 'seeing the light', when the darkness clears.

The right attitude to practice is a light heartedness. We shouldn't make it into a struggle. This is how people so often approach it, through their conditioning. They are looking for something to make a struggle out of. When

you tell them it is their nature to see, they don't listen. They don't trust in their own ability to see the truth because it can't be like that, life has to be an endless struggle. So it is. It goes on and on.

If you follow a meditation technique, it can be something to create a problem out of, rather than a stick to support you in your practice. It really doesn't much matter what technique you use provided you have the right attitude to your practice. Certainly some techniques are more suited to certain temperaments. But the trouble is, what would be most helpful is generally the one we least want to do. This is certainly true of loving kindness (metta). It is most beneficial to people of an angry temperament, but the people who really like doing it are those of a lustful temperament. (We all have these temperaments but one usually tends to predominate. Our challenge is to bring them into balance). That's why it's a good idea to think of giving yourself up to the practice, rather than cling to what you like. After you have tried it, then you can see for yourself whether it was beneficial or not. This willingness to be open to whatever is in the moment creates a pliant mind, which of wonderful benefit, far greater than whatever benefit you could get out of any meditation technique.

This attitude to practice, this gentle openness, this pliant mind, supports our development of awareness, of being in the now. It takes time, but you begin to realise what the value of a tech-

nique is in your meditation practice, and where the danger of it lies. The danger of a support, especially if it has been useful, is that we hold onto it when it's time to let go. We have to abandon our attachment completely. So it is really good to take this on as a path of practice. I used to say, 'if it's let-go-able, let go of it', and I used to test things out with this mantra. I used to investigate everything that came into the mind this way.

Then I used to test out my feelings, asking myself 'who is feeling this way?', and resting with the silence in the mind which followed. This is the practice of insight (*vipassana*). It doesn't depend on any meditation technique; it is just a way of letting go of our attachment me and mine, our grasping mind.

But we are not trying to defeat the mind. We want to do battle with the mind because it is not how we want it to be. But we should change our attitude. We should cultivate kindness towards the thoughts that arise in our minds. Trying to get rid of thoughts or block them out, this is how we empower them. When we take no special interest in them they will leave of their own accord, in their own time. This willingness to bear with what arises in the mind requires the cultivation of boundless patience – what a wonderful quality to develop.

But some thoughts are very sticky. The thoughts that hang around, these are the ones we most want to get rid of. They are the ones that have something to teach us. So we should listen to them, let them be our teachers. When we have learnt what we need to know they will not trouble us again.

Ajahn Chah described it as inviting your guests into a room in which there is only one chair, and you are sitting on it. So your guests are welcome, but they can't stay long because they have nowhere to sit. And, he said, when people are uncomfortable, they reveal themselves and you can see them for who they are.

So we should not do battle with our thoughts. Selecting those we like and dislike just traps us in our preferences, our conditioned world. It is not the way to see them as they are. The mind is a receptacle for thoughts. Thoughts arise and cease in it, that is the nature of the mind. Like people who come and go in your life. You have to welcome them all as friends, whether you like them or not.

But when you are practicing mindfulness, this practice of now, you are aware of whatever arises in the moment. When thoughts arise, you keep them standing until they go away. This is how you should be with thoughts. You don't sit down with a lustful thought, or an angry thought. Keep them standing until they reveal themselves and leave. But don't despise thoughts, for if you do you will despise your mind. It is in the mind that insights arise. The mind is where we can reflect, where we can see things as they are. We have no better friend than our own mind. I have heard people say that what they want to do is stop the mind. But they are concentrating the mind over here to escape from what they don't

like over there. They are running away. They think there is somewhere they can hide. But they are trying to hide in their own house. Who are they hiding from? It is terribly sad because this body and mind is all they have in the world. What they need to stop is the grasping mind. This is where true happiness is found.

Look at the Buddha's body. We abide in a body, it is what keeps us on the earth. It can give us a lot of pain. Physical pain helps remind us we are body bound. It brings us down to earth. It is a good place to focus the mind, and let go. The same with restlessness, these are our teachers. We should stay with them and learn. Don't rush out of class before the teacher has finished the lesson. Look at this restlessness. It isn't a problem, it is a wonderful teacher, but we have to develop the patience to stay with it.



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Why do we do this? Because it leads to freedom. When we know restlessness, we don't need to run away from it anymore. When we stop running away the mind becomes completely at ease, with both the body and the mind, whatever the moment brings, in the moment, in the now.

And here is where the transformation occurs, that turning outside of what has been for so long hidden inside. All our humanity, vulnerability and compassion that is folded within, turning outward to the world, like an opening flower. No wonder the Buddha smiles. But it is subtle isn't it. It takes a little time to see that smile, and to discover it in our own practice.

And we may need to develop many qualities we don't yet possess. But more than anything, we need to develop that quality of trust. It is the trust in the path of practice and the confidence in our own natural reflective ability to understand this body and mind, to see things as they are.

The Buddha could see that there was this potential in us all, to be enlightened. But his smile is tempered with the sadness that so few of us realise it.

My garden is full of fruit trees I planted 20 years ago. Every year I have enough fruit for everyone, I feel almost embarrassed I have to give so much away. All I have to do is wait for it to ripen, then gather it up. This is nature isn't it. But look at all the gardens with no fruit in them. All the people who probably think, if they'd planted some trees, they would have fruit now. But they still don't plant fruit trees. They probably think it isn't worth it, that it takes too long before you get any fruit.

The Buddha said that one of the greatest blessings is to have done good actions in the past. We all live in a garden, it is our mind. We need to develop and train it, in morality, concentration and wisdom. What I am talking about is the confidence that if we plant and nurture our fruit trees, one day our fruit will ripen. The only way to have the fruit of past good action is do good actions now. We are very fortunate, we have this opportunity.

Martin Evans

AUA NEWS

Transforming Problems into Happiness

This is the title of a book by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. He points out how easily we can reach a position where everything that happens is regarded as some sort of worrying problem. This is suffering—the suffering that is inherent in activity in the world. The resilient mind is able to recognise and let go of suffering. Problems and difficulties are seen as just unwholesome or challenging conditions without a substantial and enduring reality. This does not make them unreal. Buddhism does not teach a nihilistic view where ‘nothing matters’. This would be attaching to a sort of depressing passivity, rather than the lively engagement which feeds and is fed by skilful practice.

I am moved to say this because looking back over the past year revives memories of a busy and challenging period in the AUA’s history. We started the year with a number of issues. One of these was that of Women only events. On the face of it, perhaps not a particularly contentious issue, but it is one that has lingered on, consumed much Committee time and has still not entirely settled down. The debate has revolved around a complex of overlapping questions—some of which are tangential to the issue of Women’s events. These include: how best to use increasingly scarce Retreat Centre time and whether it is possible to set up some sort of federated AUA with other groups operating under an ‘umbrella’? I suspect that these interesting questions will, using Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s phrase, provide much opportunity for future happiness!

Another substantial issue was to reform our constitution and adopt a new form of membership. This was accomplished fairly painlessly and we are now gradually moving forward with these ideas. (Fuller information is contained in the last issue of Community and the new Constitution is to be found at www.buddhacommunity.org).

We celebrated our AUA 10th anniversary in the Spring and were blessed with Luang Por Sumedho’s presence. He gave a discourse, answered questions and took tea with the Committee at the end of the day.

At our forthcoming Committee meetings we will be looking at ideas for training or developing Dhamma teaching skills in lay-people, perhaps with the idea of a lay-ministry. This is something which has developed at Abhayagiri Monastery in California over recent years. We will also be considering more support for networking our community of practitioners.

Chris Ward

Amaravati lay-people’s network

Several Buddhist lay-people have suggested that they can feel isolated outside of the monastery and that they would appreciate the opportunity to make contact with fellow Buddhists who have a connection with Amaravati. It is therefore proposed that a list be circulated of people who would like to have informal contact with other lay-Buddhists, and who would in turn be happy to be contacted, by phone, email or letter.

If you would like to be part of such a network, please contact one of us with your details and whether you would prefer to be contacted by letter, email or phone:

Shirley McDonald 01622 203751 shirleymcd@blueyonder.co.uk

Supanna 01582 512669 jeanspinks@hotmail.com

Jane Carrington-Porter 01564 772166 jane@carrington-porter@fsnet.co.uk



The Amaravati Upasika - Upasaka Association (AUA) was formed to foster and encourage good Buddhist lay practice. It does this by providing a lay forum for all those interested in the Buddhist path in the form of one day and longer events, as well as other gatherings. At the heart of good Dhamma practice lies a commitment to enquiry. Whether you are interested and just beginning, or whether you have been practising for a while, we offer the opportunity to develop all aspects of the Buddhist path in a supportive lay context.

The Bodhinyana Group Programme - Spring 2005

We meet in the Bodhinyana Hall at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery – from 7.30 till 9.30pm on Wednesday evenings.

Please check our website for more details:
www.buddhacommunity.org

12th Jan	Resolution and aspiration
19th Jan	Meditation and Reflection
26th Jan	Spiritual Warriors?
2nd Feb	Entertainment?
9th Feb	Meditation and Reflection
16th Feb	Greed, Aversion, Delusion ... Fear?
23rd Feb	Sutta Study
2nd Mar	Meditation - progress and pitfalls
9th Mar	A History of the English Sangha Trust
16th Mar	Making Merit?
23rd Mar	Meditation and Reflection

Editorial & Production Team :

Chris Ward, Nick Carroll, Tony Spinks, Martin Evans
Plus much help in copying, enveloping, and posting.
The Community Newsletter is put together and published as an offering to others. All views and comments are personal.

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Hemel Hempstead,
Herts, HP1 3BZ, England

**Mailing List
Address Changes**
If you change your address, please let us know either by emailing your changes to :
metta@petalmoore.net,
or posting to the AUA as above right.

AMARAVATI LAY EVENTS - 2005

These events provide an opportunity to practice together and explore themes relevant to practice and lay life. They include silent and guided meditation, sutta study groups, yoga, discussion groups and other workshops. All are welcome.

Days of Practice – no need to book
9.45am for 10am-5pm (please bring food to share)

Retreats – advance booking essential
5.30pm – 4.00pm on last day

Jan. 15th	Day of Practice (Jenni Jepson)
Feb 12th	Day of Practice (Martin Evans)
Mar 12th	Day of Practice (Chris Ward)

April 16th	Weekend Retreat (Nick Carroll)
May 21 st	Day of Practice
June 11th	Day of Practice

July 22th – 26th 5 day retreat

Oct 21	Weekend Retreat
Dec 3 Sat	Day of Practice (including ACM)

Women's Events

Sept 9 – 10	Women's Weekend Retreat
Nov 5 th	Women's Day of Practice

****PLEASE CHECK FOR LATE CHANGES TO THE PROGRAMME ON THE WEB SITE :**

www.buddhacommunity.org

Please download booking forms from our web site

Organised by the Amaravati Upasaka/Upasika Association (AUA)

Donations and Mailing list

If you do not wish to remain on the AUA mailing list please let us know. This enables us to reduce the size of mailings and to save money.

If you wish to continue on the mailing list then you need do nothing. However, any contributions you can make to cover the production of the newsletter and the three or four mailings each year would be greatly appreciated.

Please send donations to
AUA , Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden,
Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP1 3BZ, England